FAITH IS A GAMBLE
MATTHEW 25:14-30

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A very curious and prophetically significant situation emerged last week around the city of An Loc, South Vietnam. 17,000 civilians and 6,000 soldiers are under siege in An Loc. They are surrounded by a thin but well armed force of North Vietnamese. Fifteen miles down the road is a relief column of crack troops. As of my last reading they were stalled and had been stalled for several days, because between them and An Loc lies a great open plain. To move across that plain would be an immense gamble. To commit is to chance a severe defeat. But to sit still: to not commit is to guarantee the loss of the city.

#1

Military history is full of those kinds of situations. In the early years of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln's greatest problem was finding the man who would commit himself, a General who would throw his tropps into battle. Man after man was considered and tried, but all held back: each one had apparently sound reasons of prudence - the need for more troops, more training, more weapons, more supplies. And it seemed for a while that Abraham Lincoln was the only man in the North who knew what Robert E. Lee knew in the South; namely, that nothing would be gained nor won, nor would the war be terminated apart from the willingness to gamble.

General Mark Clark wrote his personal memoirs of the North African and Mediteranen Campaign in World War II under the title "Calculated Rick." In that book the cohesive theme is the tremendous gamble involved in any military endeavor. Prudence always dictates standing still, regrouping, waiting. But victory dictates the courage to gamble.

On a more modest level I shall long remember a cold and rainy Saturday afternnon at Ross-Ade Stadium when coach DeMoss gambled to win against Ohio State rather than settle for a tying field goal and lost. And I felt at the time that it was better that way.

Now, what do An Loc and the Civil War and General Clark and a strategic decision in a football game have to do with the faith and life of people like you and me? Everything in the world, I believe. For the lesson taught by each of those ~~four~~ two #2 illustrations is the same lesson taught and lived by our Lord Jesus Christ: that to

live a full life - to experience fullness of faith is to gamble.

You know the story. A wealthy man gave three of his servants money and then went away. The scholars tell us that the amounts were not insignificant: the first received the equivalent of $10,000, the second - $5,000, the third - $1,000. When he returned some time later the first two had invested in business and had doubled their money. They were handsomely rewarded. The third had hid the money under the mattress and returned to his master exactly what he had been given. For his efforts - for his prudence - he was treated as severely as anyone in the New Testament.

I am intrigued by two things in that story. First, what do you suppose would have happened had one of those first two servants lost the money? We have to assume that there was great risk involved - as there always is in financial investment. We have to assume that there was at least the possibility of losing it all. The riskiness of the venture is magnified by the fact that it was not their money in the first place and that their master was not known as a particularly gracious loser. What would have happened had they gambled and lost? I don't know, of course, but I chose to believe that they would not have been treated as harshly as number three who did not gamble, and therefore neither won nor lost. I think that is what the parable teaches.

Second, I'm intrigued by the severity of the punishment meted out to this third servant. I'm intrigued because by any measure of fairness he was mistreated. He had shown himself, after all, to be prudent and safe and dependable. He was no gambler: he took no chances - he was, according to our standards, altogether admirable. Yet, as the story concludes he has been stripped of everything and unceremoniously thrown into the outer darkness. He didn't gamble and lost.

I think that is an extremely important story because it is so different from the way we are inclined to regard the tasks of living.

Somewhere along the line, most of us strike a bargain with life, and it's not a very good one. Somewhere along the line we learn the lesson that the pain of disappointment can be avoided if we don't gamble with life.

To be hurt in love; to commit oneself and give totally and then be hurt sometimes wounds us so deeply that we contemplate, at least, never taking that chance again.

When we see it happening to our children, when we are called on to stand by and watch a son or daughter fall hopelessly in love we are afraid for them and want very badly to tell them "don't do that: don't get so involved: you're going to get hurt." Of course, the result of that is never to know the joy and incredible ecstacy of being in love. One writer puts it this way: 'When we love we are in danger of being hurt. The ultimate tragedy is to be frightened into withdrawal by risks that keep us from not loving at all.' (James Angell, Put Your Arms Around the City, P. 175)

The terrible pain of grief when someone dear to us dies is always a product of our love for that person. "When people stand in the midst of dark and heavy sorrow", James Angell advises, 'we can only hold them hard and say, 'This is the way it has to be. If we love hard and deeply, then our sorrow will be like that, too. But it's worth it. It's just that one is the price of the other".

Or perhaps we have been hurt professionally, vocationally. Perhaps we've wanted a better job, another assignment, a promotion, and committed oneself to it to the degree that our pride and ego is on the line. And we lost, and the bitter dregs of disappointment and punctured pride taught us never to commit that much again: never to want anything that badly again. And we make a bargain at that point to avoid gambling because it hurts so badly.

Maybe it is a political involvement. To get deeply involved with a candidate or a party is, in the truest sense, to commit oneself in love. And to lose is to be bitterly disappointed. The day after election is a time of deep gloom for many people, and out of their personal pain a lot of them will vow this Wednesday never to get that involved again, because it hurts so badly.

Charlotte Bronte once wrote, 'Better to try all things and find all empty, than to try nothing and leave your life a blank." Those are good words - an eloquent sentiment. But life has taught us the hard lesson - that gambling can mean losing: that committing can mean pain. And so we make our bargain: we lower our sights, but the dream respectfully to rest, and come to terms with the status quo.

And at the point we die a little bit. At that point we give up a little bit of our humanity: at that point we turn our backs on the joyful potential God has given us.

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You see, what's really at stake, what's really behind it all is that rather clear New Testament dictum that to live as God created us to live is to love - to love to the point of gambling - of commiting - of investing ourselves. What's really at stake is the outer darkness of the third servant who took no chances. An outer darkness, which in Middle Class American terms, sounds very much like boredom and meaninglessness: the day to day filling of time without anything mattering much. The rampant emptiness of security - eloquently documented in the motion picture, "The Last Picture Show."

George Sanders, suave actor, four times married, was found dead in his Barcelona Hotel room last week. And he left what I consider the saddest suicide note anyone could write: "I'm bored. I've lived long enough."

That's what's at stake, Love - commitment - life itself.

#3 → Life keeps calling us to gamble whether we want to or not. I know of no riskier business than getting married today. When two young people decide to commit themselves to each other in the face of an uncertain economic future, the possibility of the draft, and the statistical law of averages which says quite clearly that they have at least a 25% chance of failure, they are taking a great risk. But it's worth the taking.

If there is a greater gamble than that it is to conceive, bear and raise children: to be exposed to the possibility of heart break: to take the chance of loving and giving without ever being thanked or loved in return. But it is a risk worth the taking.

A choice of vocation is always a gamble. I remember well having lunch with my minister when I was a senior in College: time was running out: a decision had to be made: and I was throwing at him all the "what-if's" I could think of. "What if I find out I don't want to be a minister? What if I get out there and can't make it financially? What if I flunk out." He said to me a very wise thing. "No decision of any magnitude is clear for an honest man. You have to risk something." And he went on to tell me how on his wedding day, he sat down on the side of the bath tub and very nearly decided not to go through with it. And it is that rather mundane conversation that I consider to be my call to the ministry.

Life calls us to love deeply enough to gamble, to risk losing. C. S. Lewis said it beautifully:

"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to be sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries: avoid all entangelements. lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket - safe, dark, motionless, airless - it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable..... The alternative to tragedy, or at least the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside,heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and pertulations of love is hell. (The Four Loves)

That sounds to me like what happened to the third servant in Jesus's story. To live openly, honestly and fully is to gamble. To experience open, honest, creative and fully Christian faith is also, I would suggest, to gamble.

Now, our understanding of faith is not usually related to words like risk and gamble and vulnerability. Faith, for most of us is assurance, certainty; or ecclessiastically the acceptance of certain tradition. "Faith - Faithful - Faithfulness" have become soft, passive words. A faithful man is one who has stuck to his guns, played his theologi al and moral cards close to his chest, and most of all has been quiet serene and peaceful. In terms of what goes for the Christian ethic in our culture the faithful man is the one who has made a career out of keeping his hands clean and who doesn't do a lot of things that are regarded as sinful, and whose greatest hope for the welfare of his fellow man rests on the restoration of prayer and Bible reading in the public schools.

Jesus was saying that that is all wrong: that that is not what faithfulness means at all. Jesus was saying that faith is a "hard" word: that it means investment - not saving: gambling - not playing it safe. He was saying that a good and faithful servant is one who knows how to love the world, and his own community and his fellowman enough to take some chances, to become vulnerable. He was saying that you and I are accountable - not on the basis of how much we were able to believe - not on the basis of all the evil we managed to avoid doing - not on the basis of the money in the ground -

but very simply, on the degree to which we gambled in love.

On the deepest possible level faith is a gamble. The honest man will know days when God does not seem Almighty: when God's love for the world seems like so much wishful thinking: when the very existence of God is a dubious proposition. How do we know? How do we know we are right? We don't. We have faith. We take a chance. We throw ourselves into the voice and hope.

One of the most eloquent preachers of the past G.A. Studdert-Kennedy- wrote a bit of prose that I have come to love because it's truth is documented in experience.

"How do I know that God is good? I don't.

I gamble like a man

I bet my life

Upon one side of life's great war. I must

I can't stand out. I must take sides. The man

Who is neutral in this fight is not

A Man."

That's where it rests for most of us. We bet our lives on one side in life's great war ... We bet our lives on God.

Jesus told the story of the three servants to his disciples in the midst of the biggest gamble in his life. It was the last week: they had just come from a confrontation with the scribes and pharises in the Temple: the die was cast: he had gambled in coming to the city: he had gambled again by going to the temple. And now he was saying to them: "This is how it is. This is what it means to belong to me."

And beyond that God, himself, took the greatest gamble of all. God sent his son, to be born into a peasant family, to live a common life, to present his case to the people - gambling that they would hear and see, or that the whole project would be ignored. God put his son - his love - at the disposal of humanity: and he keeps putting it all on the line, gambling on you and me.

So - in life and in faith - let us remember that: when we are ~~tempted to make our~~ own little bargain with life, let us recall that to live is to love, and to love is to gamble. Let us remember, as we attempt to be faithful, that God himself, considers

us worth taking a chance. AMEN

Father, you have given us all we have - even our capacity to believe. In Jesus Christ you have called us to invest it all. Give us the will - the courage. AMEN

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